



Senate Information Office

201 Paul D. Coverdell Legislative Office Building
18 Capitol Square
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
404.656.0028 or outside the Atlanta area 800.282.5803

WEEKLY COLUMN

For Immediate Release:
February 6, 2006

WEEKLY COLUMN

For Information Contact:
Merri M. Brantley, Director
Jeremy Arie, Communications Specialist
jeremy.arie@senate.ga.gov
404.463.6834

Notes from the Georgia State Senate

Education, Eminent domain issues move to the forefront

By Senator Bill Heath



The Georgia Legislature really kicked into high gear last week, as we looked at important bills from the Governor's 2006 education package. Education was the main focus of the week and dominated most of the debate, as the members of the Senate worked long hours to pass legislation important to Georgia's children.

On Tuesday, we took up Senate Bill 390, which is known as the *Classrooms First for Georgia Act*. The bill would require that every local school system spend a minimum of 65 percent of its total operating funds on direct classroom expenditures, beginning with Fiscal Year 2008. Most of the school systems in Senate District 31 already meet this 65-percent requirement. These expenditures include classroom teachers, personnel, instruction supplies, field trips, music, athletics and private institutions for special education. The bill passed the full Senate and now moves on to the House for consideration. After a spirited debate on the floor, the Senate made the right move by passing this bill. The legislation will improve our school systems by ensuring that education funds are spent where they matter most – in the classrooms. I am a strong supporter of this legislation, because it emphasizes our priority of putting teachers and students first. We are putting more money in the classrooms, and more money in the classrooms means higher student achievement.

On Thursday, we looked at Senate Resolution 655, the *HOPE Chest* amendment, which is a part of Gov. Perdue's two-fold education agenda for 2006. The resolution provides for a constitutional amendment that would limit the use of state lottery revenues to costs associated with the HOPE scholarship and Pre-K programs. After another big debate, this piece of legislation failed to achieve the required two-thirds vote (38 Senators). Twenty Democrats voted against restricting the lottery funds and forever preserving the HOPE Scholarship and Pre-K program. The following day we voted to reconsider the resolution, which was very good news. The legislation will come up again this year, and I hope when it does that my colleagues on the other side of the aisle will vote "yes" for Georgia's HOPE scholars.

One of the most talked about issues in the past year has been eminent domain. Recently, as many as 15 different bills have been introduced in the General Assembly that address eminent domain and/or the power of condemnation. On Friday, we passed Senate Bill 391, which is an eminent domain bill that my colleague Sen. Jeff Chapman and I have worked on for many months. The bill simply places a moratorium on the use of eminent domain for urban development, and it received bipartisan support in the Senate. The bill passed by a vote of 52-0, and now goes to the House. I will keep you posted on the status of this legislation as we get deeper into the 2006 session.

We also took up a measure on Friday that authorizes the State Board of Education to develop a curriculum for an elective course in the study of the Bible. The bill received bipartisan support and was passed by a vote of 49 to 1.

We are working diligently to protect the things in Georgia that are of importance. We need to preserve the rights of our private property owners, so their land is not taken from them at prices that are much lower than their actual market value or when available in an "arms-length" transaction. We want to protect small business owners – diners, small shops, restaurants, etc. – because they provide unique products to our economy that we cannot replace if their business is taken. We want to reserve the expenditure of lottery funds to the HOPE Scholarship and Pre-K program, as I believe this is essential to the future of these educational cornerstones. We want to improve Georgia's public education system, and we are taking the necessary steps to do just that.

Until next week...

#####

Sen. Bill Heath represents the 31st Senate District, which includes all of Haralson and Polk Counties and parts of Bartow and Paulding Counties. He may be reached at 404.463.1361, or by email at billheath@billheath.net.